

**STATEMENT**

**of**

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**of the**



**UNITED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**LEEDS, MASSACHUSETTS**

**before the**

**Committee on Veterans Affairs**

**Subcommittee on Health**

**United States House of Representatives**

**The Honorable Rob Simmons**

**Chairman**

**May 6, 2003**

**Washington, DC**

Chairman Simmons and members of the Committee, I am honored to be here today on behalf of the one hundred twenty (120) homeless veterans in the United Veterans of America, Inc., Shelter/Substance Abuse Program. The United Veterans of America, Inc., entered into a partnership agreement with the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1994. Since that time there has been a series of contracts/grants through the VA Grant and Per Diem Program that has allowed this partnership to effectively, compassionately, and creatively meet the needs of the homeless veterans who served our nation. Shelter – Substance Abuse Treatment – Anger Management – Criminal Justice Outreach – Reintegration – Aftercare Services have evolved from this partnership that now includes VA Connecticut and VA Massachusetts.

The UVA Homeless Shelter is located on the campus of the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Leeds, Massachusetts, in buildings six (6) and twenty-six (26). During Fiscal Year 2001-2002 we served five hundred nine (509) homeless veterans:

265	Massachusetts
204	Connecticut
40	Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont
509	Total

The average age of a homeless veteran in our program is fifty-three and one-half (53 ½) years old. Approximately eighty-five percent (85%) of our clients are alcohol/drug abusers, five percent (5%) are elderly (age seventy [70] or over, four percent (4%) are female, twenty percent (20%) are post-traumatic stress disorder, twenty-eight percent (28%) are parole/probation, and thirty-eight percent (38%) are non-white.

The VA Grant Per Diem decision to deny funding #02-106MA for forty (40) additional beds was difficult to understand with the reality that the UVA has a daily waiting list of fifty-one (51) homeless veterans. The veterans on the waiting list are exiting the jails or prisons of

Connecticut and Massachusetts, Q House at VAMC West Haven, the Substance Abuse Day Program at West Haven, Intensive Substance Treatment Program at VAMC Newington, and detox and mental health treatment units in our area of service.

The VA Grant Per Diem decision to deny Grant #02-98MA was devastating. The loss of sixty (60) beds for homeless veterans at the UVA Shelter/Program could cause the weakening of the partnership with VA Grant and Per Diem, the VA Connecticut, and the VA Massachusetts.

This partnership was built on trust, integrity, and a commitment to the dignity of each homeless veteran. The long-term security of this partnership was underwritten by the VA Grant and Per Diem Program and the VA Connecticut and VA Massachusetts Health Care Systems. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the US Department of Labor, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Massachusetts Division of Veterans Services, all provide support to this partnership through grants.

The elimination of the funding for sixty (60) beds created an environment filled with anxiety and fear for all of our one hundred twenty (120) homeless veterans. The UVA's response to this crisis was to continue to operate the sixty (60) beds until we had depleted all of our resources. We immediately began to down-size staff by five full-time positions. The transportation for recreation was eliminated and requests for emergency funding were sent out to veterans' service organizations.

The UVA immediately contacted the Massachusetts and Connecticut Congressional Delegations. Local and national media coverage began to take shape and the public interest story of war with Iraq and the lack of commitment to America's veterans came into focus.

As the result of the April 3, 2003, meeting between VA Secretary Principi and the New England Congressional Delegation, a commitment was made to provide technical assistance to the UVA in the next round of VA Grant and Per Diem funding.

The reality that ten years of building a partnership to serve homeless veterans is jeopardized by a system that seems more concerned with process and appearance rather than substance and accomplishment is disturbing.

The historical development and impact of a program cannot be reduced to a written document. There must be a program outcome evaluation system that documents the restoration and reclamation of the broken lives of the chronically homeless veteran.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans has been extremely supportive in the United Veterans of America, Inc., efforts to bring our funding crisis to a successful conclusion. The VA Grant and Per Diem Program and our local VAMC see the United Veterans of America, Inc. as a subservient partner this has continuously brought about needless misunderstandings and tensions. The implementation and funding of Public Law 107-95 would enable the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans to be an equal and trusted advocate for homeless veterans.

I must acknowledge the strength, wisdom, and support the United Veterans of America, Inc., has received through this difficult period from Congressmen Richard Neal and John Olver and Senators John Kerry, Ted Kennedy, and Christopher Dodd.

I want to thank the New England Congressional Delegation for recognizing the viability of the partnership that exists with the United Veterans of America, VA Connecticut, and VA Massachusetts.

Chairman Simmons and members of the Committee, my heartfelt thanks and respect for your commitment to homeless veterans.